



Photos: Bel Perez Gabilondo.



Recipe for Success

J.O. Wilson's Test Scores Capture Community's Attention

BY KYLE JOHNSON

How do you turn around an underperforming school? J.O. Wilson Principal Cheryl Warley has faced this question and, by many measures, succeeded in finding an answer during her time at the helm of the elementary school.

Now in her eighth year as principal, Warley said there are a few major factors to get lined up to improve teaching and learning: Make sure teachers know what they learn, provide extra attention for struggling students and get total buy-in from school staff, the students and their parents.

Warley's approach recently earned her an award from the National Association of Elementary School Principals. She was one of 63 principals nationally to receive the award.

A look at the facts shows that Wilson, located at 660 K St. NE, is headed in the right direction. In last year's DC Comprehensive Assessment System exam, more than three-fourths of tested students were proficient or advanced in math, or about 20 percent more than in the 2008 tests. Reading scores also went up, from about 68 percent proficient or advanced in 2008 to more than 72 percent in 2009.

The substantial math test score increase made Warley, a former math teacher, particularly proud. She said that her teachers are expected to stretch concepts to the fullest, meaning they teach the basics and then take the lesson as far as it goes.

"Everything you learn today you're going

need the next week and the week after that to be successful in math, so you have to understand the concept," she said. "They stretch it so when you get to that higher level, you can master that."

As the school's academic reputation has improved, the prospects of Wilson graduates have also brightened. Warley said junior highs have told her that Wilson students are better prepared for the next step than the average student.

"I think we're getting there," she said.

A Cultural Shift

DC Councilmember Tommy Wells (Ward 6) met Warley while serving on the school board and was quickly impressed by the "really extraordinary" programs and strong base of support at the school.

"Overall, it's just been a very strong school," Wells said.

In a short amount of time, Wells has watched the school and the community become better places together.

"It's 100 percent safer, and it's a place to be instead of a place to fear," he said. "It's not a secret that that's a good school."

Warley agreed that there has been a major change in the school's culture since she arrived.

"When I first got here, we had a lot of angry people, and to be honest, the lockers



were punching bags," she said.

This problem ultimately stemmed from the classroom, in her view; students didn't understand what they were being taught, and as a result, they became frustrated. Solving that problem required high demands on the teaching staff.

"I always tell the staff it's not about me, it's about the children. That has to be the first priority," she said, adding that one bad teacher "can spoil the whole bunch."

The school also stopped outside recess to help calm the children down, and each school day now starts with a "school meeting" to reinforce the culture and help prevent prob-

lems. At that meeting, students say the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the school song.

A good behavior reward system was also created. "Cardinal dollars" are given to students "doing the right thing," and the currency can be used at the school store.

Warley said one of the most important ways to keep the school running smoothly resulted from her boredom.

Before coming to Wilson, Warley was an associate principal at a junior high. Upon arriving at an elementary school, where students stay in the same classroom for much of the day, she realized that she missed walking around and talking to students in between class.

On a typical day, Warley now is a common sight throughout the school building.

"Walking around the school and seeing the children really lets you know what's going on," she said.

Not just for children

Wilson has also become well-known for its work with a wide array of outside organizations.

Many community groups work with the school to improve it. The library, for example, was remodeled recently by a construction firm that did the work for free (money was raised by the Friends of J.O. Wilson to cover the cost of the materials used.)

The new playground and soccer field, which opened in May, are also impressive examples of what can be done when schools work with the community. ANC 6C Commissioner Anne Phelps said that neighbors of the school, frustrated with the criminal activity associated with the playground after school hours, started brainstorming for a solution. A grant from the Urban Land Institute helped to speed up the planning, and the city chipped in to cover the cost.

Phelps said that the problems of the old playground are gone for now.

"If you invest in people, it usually pays off," she said.

The playground is open to the public on the weekends by volunteers, and Phelps said the area is "the community gathering space that we dreamed it could be."

Wilson students also receive unique mentoring opportunities because of outside groups. For example, some US Court of Appeals judges and lawyers come to the school twice a week to mentor children and read them stories. A men's organization, using the school as a meeting space for evening events, has contributed to the school by supplying snacks for test week and agreeing to chaperone a boys-only field trip.

Nancy Rothgerber, whose oldest daughter is in her first year at Wilson, became involved at the school while working on the playground project. She said the level of outside involvement was a major reason why her daughter is going to the school today.

"Seeing their passion and commitment to the school made me realize that we had something special, right in our very own backyard," she said.

A Page from the Charter Playbook

Wilson met its enrollment target of 323 students at the beginning of the school year, although the school planning population is listed at 400 students. Warley said the makeup of the student body is shifting as well.

Historically, about half of the students have been out-of-boundary. Most of these students have parents or grandparents who attended Wilson.

This year, however, almost 70 percent of the students are from the neighborhood. Warley added that 12 Caucasian families sent their children to the predominantly African-American school for the first time this year.

"We've always had one or two families, but they haven't been from the area. This year for the first time they're from the community," she said.

Warley links this change to aggressive recruitment and improvements at the school. The school held an open house last year, and a "now enrolling" banner is displayed in front of the school.

"Just like the charter schools do," Warley said.

To learn more about J.O. Wilson, call 202-698-4733. ★



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